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SUBJECT: BHARAT BALLOT 09: MARCH 12 SOUTHERN SNAPSHOTS

REF: A) CHENNAI 066; B) CHENNAI 059

¶1. (U) Below is a compilation of election highlights from Consulate General Chennai that did not feature in our other reporting on India's upcoming elections:

-- Tamil Nadu: Congress/DMK partnership set to reprise 2004's grand alliance?

-- Tamil Nadu: a brief fast for Sri Lankan Tamils

-- Kerala: infighting over candidates hurts Congress's chances to rout CPM

-- Kerala: Rahul's big campaign speech doesn't meet expectations

-- Andhra Pradesh: Election Commission symbol decision hurts Praja Rajyam's prospects

Tamil Nadu: Congress/DMK partnership set to reprise 2004's grand alliance?

¶1. (U) In 2004 the DMK and Congress parties swept the parliamentary elections by assembling a broad-based coalition of parties which included the Tamil Nadu-based PMK and MDMK parties and the state affiliates of the Communist Party of India and the Communist Party of India (Marxist). But the alliance crumbled over time: the MDMK defected to the opposition shortly after the 2004 elections; the DMK and PMK broke ties in June 2008 after a protracted feud; and the communist parties withdrew support from the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) in August 2008 over U.S.-India civil nuclear cooperation. Tamil Nadu's media is now abuzz with rumors that Congress and the DMK are on the verge of constructing another broad coalition by bringing the PMK back into the fold and replacing the MDMK and communist parties with an important new player on the Tamil Nadu scene, the DMDK founded by Tamil film star Vijayakanth.

¶2. (U) The hard feelings that led to the DMK-PMK split, largely the result of protracted sniping between the parties' respective leaders (DMK Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi and PMK founder S. Ramadoss), appear to have been smoothed over. On March 6, Ambumani Ramadoss, son of PMK founder S. Ramadoss and the Union Minister of Health and Family Welfare in the UPA government, suggested that the PMK would stay with Congress and the DMK, telling a press conference that "the UPA will come back to power." Rumors of Vijayakanth's DMDK joining

the Congress/DMK combine started with the visit of the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee President to a senior DMDK leader's house. Speculation increased when Union Minister for Statistics and Program Implementation G.K. Vasan, who is the Tamil Nadu Congress Party's most prominent leader, said "good news will be coming soon." Comment: Although the makeup of pre-poll alliances is difficult to predict, especially in Tamil Nadu's free-wheeling non-ideological environment, these are strong indications that the DMK and Congress are on the road to replicating another version of the broad-based coalition that swept Tamil Nadu's parliamentary elections in 2004. The combination of DMK, Congress, PMK, and DMDK would be a very formidable one that would go a long way to overcoming the anti-incumbency, corruption allegations, and concern for Sri Lankan Tamils that weigh down the DMK and Congress in Tamil Nadu. End comment.

Tamil Nadu: a brief fast for Sri Lankan Tamils

13. (SBU) Tamil Nadu Opposition leader J. Jayalalithaa held a widely-publicized eight hour fast on March 10 condemning the central and state governments for remaining "mute spectators" to the killing of Tamils in Sri Lanka. She demanded an immediate ceasefire on the island and highlighted the severe shortage of food and medicine facing Sri Lanka's Tamils. While Jayalalithaa fasted in Chennai, senior AIADMK officials led similar hunger-strikes throughout Tamil Nadu and the party collected donations to provide relief to the Tamils. Many in Tamil Nadu saw the brief fast as a political stunt.

Jayalalithaa is seen as relatively unresponsive to the concerns of Sri Lanka's Tamils largely on account of her history of criticizing the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Her decision to fast over Sri

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Lanka shows the recent resonance of the issue in the state's politics (ref B); despite her own ambivalence about Sri Lanka, Jayalalithaa senses an opportunity to further embarrass DMK Chief Minister Karunanidhi. Her rival has long professed his solidarity with the Sri Lankan Tamils (seeing himself as "the Father of World Tamils") but has come under fire as of late for not sufficiently wielding his influence in New Delhi to pressure Sri Lanka to agree to a ceasefire. Jayalalithaa's effort to exploit the Sri Lanka issue, however, has been received with a healthy dose of cynicism. One internet poster commented that "a day-long fast is nothing. Most people in Tamil Nadu eat only every other day . . . Come on sister, FAST UNTO DEATH."

Kerala: infighting over candidates
hurts Congress's chances to rout CPM

14. (SBU) The Kerala Congress Party's trouble with candidate selection is threatening its ability to take advantage of the struggles of its rival, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (ref C). Candidates with the best chance of winning are having trouble getting party tickets because of intraparty rivalries and interest group pressure tactics. A senior media contact told post that the Congress-led United Democratic Front could squander its upper hand in the upcoming elections. He cited the example of Ernakulam (Cochin) where a strong candidate in the Latin Catholic-dominated constituency -- the up-and-coming Hybee Eden, President of the National Students Union of India and member of the Latin Catholic church -- is having difficulty securing a ticket. Eden is the son of a former Member of Parliament from Ernakulam who won every election he ever contested there. According to a media contact, KV Thomas, a long-time Congress party leader from the Latin Catholic church, spent several days camped out in New Delhi lobbying against Eden. Thomas apparently fears losing his position as the preeminent Latin Catholic leader in the Kerala Congress party.

15. (SBU) In Kerala's Trichur constituency, the dominant Syrian Catholic Church is in a bitter tussle with Congress's state leadership over candidate selection. The Church supports Tom Vadakkan, a Secretary in the All India Congress Committee (AICC) who operates mostly out of Delhi. Many local Congress leaders view Vadakkan as a candidate imposed on the state party by New Delhi and lacking experience with Kerala's grassroots. Vadakkan was dressed

down at a Congress party meeting in New Delhi by a party member who said "chai-walas (tea-boys) and sweepers of the AICC should not be made candidates in Kerala." Extensive media coverage in Kerala of the "chai-wala" insult exacerbated Vadakkan's humiliation. The Church has mounted a pressure campaign on Vadakkan's behalf, leading State Congress President Ramesh Chennithala to risk the ire of this important Congress constituency suggesting the Church needed to stay out of the candidate selection debate. The Congress party finds itself in a tough spot with the Vadakkan candidacy as a decision either way will alienate some part of its core support base -- either Syrian Catholics or committed party workers.

Kerala: Rahul doesn't live up to high expectations

16. (SBU) Rahul Gandhi headlined a massive rally in Thiruvananthapuram kicking off the Kerala Congress Party's election campaign. The tens of thousands of Congress supporters in attendance gave Gandhi a rousing reception hailing him as "tomorrow's leader." Top Congress leaders, including Defense Minister A.K. Antony, told the crowd that Gandhi, a symbol of youth and dynamism, would lead the country forward. Addressing the rally, Gandhi emphasized his efforts to change Indian politics, starting with the Youth Congress and the National Students Union of India. Journalists told post that despite the crowd's enthusiastic cheering for the young leader, Gandhi failed to deliver the stirring performance that the crowd expected.

Andhra Pradesh: Election Commission
symbol decision hurts Praja Rajyam's prospects

17. (U) Praja Rajyam, the political party founded in 2008 by popular Telugu film star Chiranjeevi, suffered a major setback as the Election Commission ruled that the new party is not eligible for a

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"common symbol" for the upcoming elections. The ruling bars the party's candidates from using a common emblem to identify themselves on the ballot. The Election Commission found that Praja Rajyam did not meet the requirement of having earned a minimum prescribed percentage of the votes in at least one previous election. The party claims the requirement is unconstitutional, arguing that it is unfair to deny a common symbol to a party which has registered, by its own count, 5 million members in the state.

18. (U) Symbols are critical in Indian elections because the substantial portion of the electorate that is illiterate relies on them to identify their preferred candidate. Praja Rajyam is unlikely to prevail in its effort to overturn the Election Commission's decision, which will leave the party in a serious bind.

Without a common symbol the party's candidates will have to run as a series of independent candidates, each with their own symbol assigned to them by lottery. Voter confusion will be likely as they will have a difficult time identifying Praja Rajyam candidates. After the denial of Praja Rajyam's common symbol it is difficult to imagine the party making a major impact on the upcoming elections.

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